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Beyond the Broadcast: Nello and the People's Method ...

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Abstract

This article explores the development of an audio praxis that combines oral history, sound design, storytelling, and archival material to engage with and critically examine history. The author reflects on the creation and impact of a number of audio projects that address historical silences, elevate marginalised voices, and engender a more critical understanding of history. By analysing the audio projects as well as related workshops and community engagement initiatives the article demonstrates the power of podcasts.

Keywords

archive, history, sound design, marginalised voices, community engagement, digital preservation

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“I was prepared to go to anywhere that any group of black people were prepared to sit down to talk and listen”.

Walter Rodney (1969/2019)

In the long summer of 2008 between the post SATs euphoria of year 6 (primary school) and the collared transition to year 7 (secondary school), I enrolled in a short radio course at BSix College in East London. Roughly 15 years later, I returned with some friends, and a briefcase filled with reprinted ephemera, photographs and QR codes that link to excerpts from the soon to be award-nominated podcast created as part of the *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* – a multimedia archive collection.

Assata's Chant and Other Histories is a multimedia archive project consisting of an award-nominated audio series, exhibitions and workshops. The project fuses visual art, interviews, readings, immersive storytelling, music and sound design to tell an anthology of histories from the 20th century Black Liberation Movement with particular focus on Assata Shakur, but also including the likes of Altheia Jones Leconte, Fred Hampton, Connie Matthews, Mutulu Shakur, Sundiata Acoli, and more.

In this article I have been asked to write about my audio praxis, as this is a journal and I do have some academic aspirations. However, I am resisting pressures to code switch into my best tenured professor imitation. Instead, I'll approach this as if we are in BSix college with the reunited history class of 2023.

The development of my audio praxis has been predominantly intuitive.¹ I've received no formal training in sound engineering, audio editing, sound design, documentary scripting, creative writing, oral history or research. Despite this, I have developed an oral history centred practice of audio production. The majority of my audio production work, including the 20-episode *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* series, are researched, recorded, scripted, mixed and sound designed by me with music from my collaborators. I have written elsewhere about the production process behind *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* (McKenzie-Witter, 2022). But as you may have gathered from the vignette above, for me the practice of audio production extends beyond my technical creation of the audio broadcast or upload.

¹ The Inward Yearning of Jamaica's 'Intuitive' Artists, Frieze, 16 August 2024: <https://www.frieze.com/article/rianna-jade-parker-jamaica-244>

Having come into the audio industry during the so-called golden age of podcasting, it was obvious to me very early on that the industry on both sides of the Atlantic was merely scratching the surface of the medium's full potential. To my relief, I was not alone. In the last half decade, scholarly discourse began to place podcasting in a wider digital humanities and cultural studies context (Spinelli et al., 2018). Through my situated experience in several independent, collaborative and commissioned audio productions, I have identified a number of ways in which audio production can be paired with other disciplines in a way that elevates their impact.

In the planning stages it was my hope, and the hope of BSix College history teacher Lucy Capes, that utilising the collection of art, audio, and ephemera amassed in the creation of the project, my team and I would be able to assist the Year 13 (A level) History students in covering the Civil Rights movement section for their exam on 'Civil Rights and Race relations in America 1850-2009'. Not too long ago, and even now, the idea of a podcast in the classroom might have caused suspicion. But the scholarship supporting the benefits podcast can have for students is both decreasingly novel and increasingly consistent (Hitchcock, Iverson et al., 2009; Nielsen et al., 2018; Drew, 2017; Fernandez et al., 2009).

However, our approach for the workshops with the Year 13 History Class of 2023 was more critical of the curriculum than supplementary. Over two sessions we collectively critiqued the sacred timeline of the Civil Rights movement presented in the textbook – *Civil Rights and Race Relations in the USA, 1850-2009* (Edexcel A Level History, 2016) – and in mainstream historical media productions, by interrogating historical silences.²

The concept of historical silences is commonly attributed to Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his 1995 book *Silencing the Past*. The concept refers to the power and politics surrounding gaps or silences in the historical record. To elucidate this, think of a former colony like Haiti or Jamaica or even the Black community in the United States which is often, although not without criticism, referred to as an internal colony (Harris, 1972). In these examples, much of the historical documents detailing the histories of those under

² Sacred timeline refers to a concept used in Disney's MCU, a historical timeline of events that were curated and enforced across multiple realities by a powerful being known as He Who Remains and his bureaucratic militia known as the TVA (Time Variance Authority). The chief operation of the TVA was to preserve the sacred timeline but destroying or 'pruning' what they referred to as divergences or branches of time that do not fit the one He Who Remains had mapped out (Sacred Timeline, n.d.).

colonial domination in these locations are often created both by and for the imperial powers. As a result, the perspectives, concerns and narratives of those dominated by the imperial powers are left out of recorded history leaving gaps or silences. Trouillot asserts that over time, these gaps lead to the effective disappearance of an event from the historical record and that certain events are unthinkable and are intentionally silenced due to the disruption they cause to the widely believed historical narrative. This silencing brings the historical narrative "back within the realm of accepted discourse" (Trouillot, 1995, 72). A main feature of the sessions involved discussions around the contradiction between what Trouillot calls 'historicity one' and 'historicity two', that is, *what happened* versus *what is said to have happened* (Trouillot, 1995). At the core of this is the understanding that what we know of as history is a collection of narratives commissioned and sanctioned by those in power to tell the story that benefits them as being objective truth.

In the first session, the silences in the textbook (Murphy, 2016) we highlighted included: the absence of Ella Baker (1903-1986) despite her having a major role in the creation, or the major successes, of the American Civil rights organisations covered in the textbook i.e. NAACP, SCLC & SNCC (Ransby, 2005); the fact that members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee carried and used guns when working in the South (Cobb, 2014) and finally the story of Munroe North Carolina's NAACP chair Robert F. Williams (1925-1996).³ The students' reaction to the history of Robert and Mabel Williams inspired me to create and include them in *Radio Free Dixie*, an audio documentary that focuses on the radio show Robert F. Williams and Mabel Williams co-produced and broadcast to the US from exile in Cuba using short wave radio between 1961 and 1965 after being falsely accused of kidnapping (Tyson, 2020).

³ In relation to the Civil Rights movement, the sacred timeline involves the events of the civil rights movement most popularly covered in public histories of the movement i.e. Rosa Parks' Montgomery Bus Boycott, a particular version of the march on Washington and the subsequent assassinations of both Martin Luther King Jr. and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X. With this in mind, divergent stories like that of Ella Baker, The Williams' and an armed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee would need pruning to maintain the curated timeline. See the account of Gewoon_Arne and the piece entitled *Miss Minutes Explains the Sacred Timeline* (9 June 2021), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGG2bhl_V_E

Excerpts from *Radio Free Dixie* by Weyland McKenzie-Witter, originally transmitted on BBC Radio 4's *Short Cuts*, 18 April, 2023

WMW - 8:23

What do you think of Robert F Williams and the Radio Free Dixie story?

Student one - 8:27

I just find it really cool. And I guess how he was restricted and like, I guess forced to flee America never stopped him. And I guess in his mission of Black Power and Black liberation.

Student two - 8:42

He didn't stop at just escaping. He got his own radio show. So, it's really like, he's really fearless.

Student three - 8:49

I think this is like, a good like story to like talk about

Student four - 8:53

Stories like these are the ones that show us that, like, the liberation, the power of Black people when, like, we're never shown their strength we're always shown their weaknesses.

Student five - 9:02

it's good to talk about him, to keep his memory alive and keep him living, because he was an icon.

Student six - 9:08

and we're just learning about him, like at our big age. So, it's enlightening, and it kind of just makes me wonder how many other histories are undocumented.

In the next session the following week, we attempted to address the biggest silence I noticed. While the textbook is said to cover the years 1850-2009, through the turn of a single page the book transitions from 1968 to 2004, from the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the beginnings of the Obama

presidential campaign (Murphy, 2016). Lost to this gap are minor events like mass incarceration, the crack epidemic, the so-called war on drugs, the 1992 LA uprisings, and especially the chimera of Black armed resistance in the United States that has resulted in scores of political prisoners and martyrs, some of whom we explore in *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* project.

Instead of talking at the students for this session we developed an activity for them that recreated the archival research process behind the production of the podcast. Divided into groups, the students were given folders related to specific individuals featured in the series that contained printed out copies of research and archival material, third party or original photographs and QR codes linked to audio from the series. Using these the students were tasked with developing a biography of the individual featured in their groups folder. As planned, over time, students realised the crossover between the individuals they were researching as splintered groups and came together to piece the histories together. We concluded the session with the students reflecting on how our thoughts about race relations in America today are altered by this 40-year silence?

“History is no casual thing that one picks up while passing through school. It becomes a part of one’s total orientation towards the world”.

Amos Wilson (1993)



Photo of Nello's IRL workshop at BSix College, 2023

It has been my experience that podcasts can have a positive impact in the investigative phase of academic research and in the dissemination of academic research to public audiences. To illustrate the former, I will briefly detail the production of *Galleries Get It Together*, a podcast or audio documentary produced by myself in collaboration with South London Galleries' young artist programme known as the 'Art Assassins'. The audio piece was created to support Patria Román-Velázquez's research into community-led responses to equality, diversity and inclusion in the creative sector as part of a partnership between South London Gallery and King's College London. Over eight weeks, with the help of South London Gallery staff, fifteen of the young artists were guided to produce the audio piece by taking part in a number of workshops, interviews and training in audio production with guest lectures organised by myself. The aim of the audio piece was to investigate the questions: 'What does an equitable and community-led gallery look like? What stories should be told?'. According to Román-Velázquez: "This project supports and enhances the research by including the voices of under-represented youth groups in debates around equality, diversity, and inclusion in the creative sector" (Román-Velázquez, 2024). Throughout the twenty-seven minute audio piece, Art Assassins can be heard discussing the themes and discussions surrounding the research, providing their opinions and interviewing others with the aim of answering the research question. "The aim of the participatory arts-based project was to maximise reach and scope of discussions about EDI in publicly funded galleries" (Román-Velázquez, 2024). With this statement, Román-Velázquez is suggesting that the collaborative podcast assisted the study by furthering the depth of discussions that would have been had using traditional research methodology and allows the research to go beyond the traditional academic audience as an easily digestible podcast.

Excerpt from *Galleries Get It Together* by Weyland McKenzie-Witter and SLG Art Assassins, originally published January 20, 2024.

Huyen:

I think it's important that as representing a lot of minorities through this, we don't want to just have it in one moment just because a certain event is happening that centres the community. But to continue to talk about the struggles even after the supposed trend has died out and fighting against

that sort of performative representation and continuing the people's legacy, creating art by the people, for the people, from the people.

In line with my experience, there is also a growing scholarly case supporting the use of podcasts in tandem with academic research (Demarco, 2022, Howard-Sukhil et al., 2021). My work on *Make It Plain* and *Race and Racism in our Modern World* illustrate the effectiveness of audio production in assisting the repackaging and distribution of the work of academics for a general audience. To mark the 30th anniversary of the tragic racist murder of Stephen Lawrence on 22 April 1993, Nello collaborated with De Montfort University's Stephen Lawrence Research Centre to produce a podcast series to commemorate the monumental meaning and significance of the anniversary. Series one of *Race and Racism in our Modern World* sees SLRC research fellows Fatima Rajina, Yusef Bakali, Karis Champion and research assistant Rayann Bryan hosting podcast episodes that bring their academic research to life in the form of a conversation or interview. The *Make It Plain* podcast is hosted by academic, activist, and author Professor Kehinde Andrews. Series one of *Make It Plain* was focused on the key ideas and issues around Black studies, a topic that has been spearheaded in the UK by Professor Andrews and his colleague at Birmingham City University. The series featured globally prominent Black scholars such as, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nicola Rollock, Cecil Gutzmore, Beverly Bryan and more. Since its launch, the podcast has amassed tens of thousands plays, a welcomed addition to the 'Curriculum for Blackness' (Fox et al, 2020). As I write this, we are currently in production for series two of both podcasts, both of which were developed particularly as a space for Black academics to discuss and share their research and academic practice to the public in a way that bypass the paywalls that often restrict academic research inside the ivory tower. Academic podcasting is a necessary subgenre of both podcasting and digital humanities (Copeland & McGregor, 2021), one which Nello will continue to explore through our current and developing partnerships with the aim of decentering the academy as the primary site of knowledge while fostering pipelines of decolonial knowledge production and distribution.

Archival Activation in Podcasting

A large and growing part of my practice is using audio production as a method of archival activation and digital preservation.⁴ From my experience in creating historical podcasts, archival material has been essential in developing the critical digital storytelling at the core of my and Nello's practice. As was illustrated in the first example used in this paper, Nello has developed a method of using existing – and creating new – archival material for use in workshops or activations.

In her 2022 keynote address to the digitising hidden collection symposium Michelle Caswell argued: "Through strategic outreach with activists, artists, and other community members, archivists can ensure the records in their care are activated to stop oppression in the present" (2022, 6). While I am somewhat *Afropessimistic* about the ability of archival activation to stop oppression I agree that archival activation of specific collections can have wider reaching social impact.⁵

Nello applies archival activation in both audio and during our *IRL* (In real life) workshops. Episode nine of *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* focuses on Connie Matthews, a Jamaican woman who became the international coordinator of the Black Panther Party for Self Defence. Throughout the episode, we activate archival material that we found during the research to help tell Connie's story. An example of this is a portrait of Connie Matthews by Seattle-based photographer Robert Wade who was friends with Connie.

⁴ Archival activation refers to events or activities that utilise or 'bring life' to archival material.

⁵ See *Afropessimism* by Frank B Wilderson III (2020) or concise definition available here:

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0056.xml>



Connie Matthews in Denmark circa July 1969 by Robert Wade

Excerpt from Connie Matthews, episode 9, *Assata's Chant and Other Histories*, 2022

Wade:

I took that photograph in the apartment that I was staying in. It was probably July of 1969... It was a gloomy night because it was the night that we had found out that Bobby Seale had been arrested in the United States, one of the Black Panther leaders, and I put the flash on the floor and flashed up and got a good photograph. I made a good photograph of Connie.

In 2022, we launched the *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* audiovisual experience with a month-long multi-wall exhibition at iconic London venue The Roundhouse. The exhibition paired audio from the project (via QR code and two screens) with artwork specifically commissioned for the project by artists such as Elfreda Dali, Kieron Boothe, Zeny Rehman as well as photography by me.

The audio highlighted in the exhibition centred on oral interviews and what Nello defines as 'Audio Surrogates'. Audio Surrogates are audio recreations of shorter text-based material like speeches, statements, communiques, and book excerpts that include: *New Afrikan People's struggle* by Sundiata Acoli (licensed

through PM press), Speeches by Connie Matthews, Joan Bird, and communiqués by Assata Shakur. These audio surrogates were created with the assistance of voice artists such as Sirena Riley, Ryan Anderson, Sophia Brown, and Ffiondra Witter. We created them as a means of increasing the accessibility of these documents and as a means of preserving them in an audio format. We pair these audio surrogates with visual material to create multi-sensory immersion in the history being told through the project. Alongside the exhibition, we also developed a partnership with New Beacon Books, which saw London's first black publishers and bookstore setting up a stall at our opening event. In August 2023, in collaboration with the non-profit arts centre FAM Oakland, we brought the *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* audiovisual experience to Oakland, California. In June 2024, we presented our *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* collection for the third time in an audio-visual exhibition at The Black Eats Festival. The latter two exhibitions included photographs of Connie Matthews provided by Robert Wade alongside the oral history of him taking the photos.



Elfreda Dali at *Assata's Chant and Other Histories* pop-up exhibition, Black Eats Festival, June 2024.

In September 2023, we facilitated an archival activation workshop for BSix College History students exploring the life and work of the great Artist and Activist Paul Robeson using the Marx Memorial Library's collection of Robeson related material. Using the archival material, we explored Robeson's life and career as well as larger themes that came up in discussion like the duty of artists, representation in media and the ethics of AI. The archival material was

supplemented with excerpts of original interview with historian Christian Høgsbjerg. Parts of the workshop were recorded. There was a particular focus on capturing the students' journey of discovery. A second workshop is planned for December 2024. In the upcoming session an additional original interview with Gerald Horne who authored the biography *Paul Robeson: Artist as Revolutionary* (2016) will be also utilised in the workshop. The audio material generated by these workshops is being developed into an audio documentary on Robeson, the workshop, and MML's Robeson material.



Photo of Nello's IRL workshop at MML 2023.

“In an era where we increasingly rely on virtual space; it becomes especially important to create physical spaces where people can sit and talk together face to face”.

Désirée Rochat (2020)

Conclusion

My audio practice involves a multidisciplinary layering of archival exploration, digital humanities, oral history, storytelling, audio production, and exhibitions as a means of analysing and interrogating history to make sense of the modern world around us. While developing this intuitive practice, I became particularly interested in the interplay of pedagogy, oral history, archival activation, and audio production. At the core of my practice is an exploration of this interplay through exhibitions, archival workshops, and collaborative production with young people and those in academic fields. My upcoming work includes an oral history based public health podcast, and a collaborative audio production as part of a Tower Hamlets' Archives' Communities of Liberation historical research public art initiative, which aims to increase awareness of the long history of the African presence in London's East End 1567 – 1802. Plus, a series on Trinidadian activist broadcaster and writer Darcus Howe with my colleague Deanna Lyncook as part of her *History Hotline* podcast series. As I continue to balance studies in archives and records management with my creative practice, I aim to contribute to growing scholarship into the relationship between these fields and further the impact of my work.

Author Details

Weyland McKenzie-Witter is an award-winning multidisciplinary Audio Artist, Creative Producer, Writer and Archivist in-training. Weyland works with existing, and creating, new archival collections through storytelling and oral history, and he is the Founder and Director of [NELLO](#). Nello sits at the intersection of heritage and cultural production, specialising in creating archival collections, audio visual productions, exhibitions, educational workshops and more. Weyland is the Exec Producer of Professor Kehinde Andrews's *Make It Plain* podcast, and he has produced on *Small Axe: The Podcast*, the companion for Steve McQueen's award-winning series. Other productions include Spotify's award-winning series *Decode*, BBC's *Who Was Michael X*, *The Echoic Archive* for Somerset House, as well developing and presenting *The Black and The Green*, a BBC Radio 4 doc on climate change, the BBC 1Xtra Rap Show with Kenny Allstar, and The 1Xtra Dancehall Show with Seani B. Other work: a podcast in collaboration with South London Gallery and King's College Researcher Dr Patria Roman-Velazquez, and development producer on *The Guardian's Cotton Capital*. Weyland was

nominated for Best New Producer at the 2021 Audio Production Awards, and he won Best Audio Immersive Producer at the 2024 UKAN.

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